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OPINION

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Obey's new GI Bill needed, affordable

While much of the attention regarding the new GI Bill approved by Congress has been on its Senate supporters - particularly Virginia Democrat Jim Webb, a vice presidential prospect - the heavy lifting on this vital legislative initiative has been done by Wisconsin Congressman Dave Obey.

The Wausau Democrat, who chairs the powerful House Appropriations Committee, is the sponsor and most tireless proponent of the largest expansion in educational benefits for veterans since the creation of the original GI Bill at the end of World War II. And now that the Senate has joined the House in approving the measure, it is Obey who deserves a special thanks from Iraq and Afghanistan veterans, their families and all who believe that the men and women who wear this country's uniform deserve its support when they hang those uniforms up.

Of course, Obey doesn't see it that way.

He is the one who is offering the "thank you."

"Our service members and their families have been the only ones asked to sacrifice for this war, and they've been asked to sacrifice again and again and again. They deserve more than just a salute for their service," says Obey. "So I'm glad to see that the Senate agrees that investing in the future of our veterans is not just the right thing to do for them, it's the right thing to do for our economy too."

Despite the griping from the Bush White House and Sen. John McCain about costs, Obey's right when he says that the new GI Bill ought to be seen as an appropriate repayment of a debt

this country owes to those who did their duty despite the flawed vision of their leaders.

But this is about more than just appreciating veterans.

The new GI Bill is sound economics.

Like the original GI Bill, Obey's proposal is conceived as a stimulus for an economy that can and should shift away from a war- time footing. The first GI Bill helped almost 8 million World War II veterans obtain education and job training and, as Obey notes, "the record shows that every dollar spent on the program created a seven- fold return for the economy."

America could use a similar boost today.

Unfortunately, GI Bill benefits are not what they once were. Today, education benefits for veterans cover only about 60 percent of the cost of college. That's a shortfall that can price the neediest vets out of a secure future.

Obey's plan is to return educational benefits to the level they were at for WWII vets, giving a new generation of troops the resources they will need to continue making a contribution to the country they love.

What's the price tag?

The cost for the first two years of the new GI bill would be about what the U.S. spends to maintain the Iraq occupation for two days.

Dave Obey's right. We can afford to say "thank you" to those who have served.

